Malcolm H. "Mac" McCrady
"Pilot For a Day - - Patriot for Life"

On a fall day in 1948 a B-25 'Billy Mitchell' bomber entered the sky over Owatonna Minnesota leaving an indelible mark never to be forgotten by those who were witness to it.

But most Owatonnans went to bed that night unaware that the giant flying machine had touched down at the local municipal airport. However, the next morning word spread quickly throughout the city that a big bomber was sitting at the end of the runway out at the airport where Owatonna native, U.S.Air Force Flight Sgt. Malcolm "Mac" McCrady had brought it safely to a halt.

National syndicated columnists such as Paul Gallico in New York did special stories about the unbelievable feat of an enlisted man flying the big bomber 'solo' from Akron Ohio's Wright Patterson Field to Owatonna Minnesota's tiny municipal airfield without incident.

Ironically, at the time, top Air Force brass had told Congress that reducing the size of the B-25 crew from five to three couldn't be done. There would be 'hell to pay' for the embarrassment McCrady caused the Army brass and it would be McCrady who would pay.

McCrady was recruited in 1938 by the "Army Air Corps" as it was then known. At the time he was a student at the National Youth Administration (NYA) school at Shakopee, Minnesota where he broke all previous test scores on the basic mechanics of airplane engines.

The Air Corps recruiters got him to sign on the dotted line by promising he would become a fighter pilot but it didn't work out. Soon after he was officially 'in the service' he was found to be 20% colorblind which 'washed him out' of the pilot training program. He immediately requested a medical discharge to enlist in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) which was desparate for pilots and was taking applicants who were up to 25% colorblind. His request was denied. His hopes of becoming a pilot took a 'nosedive.'

Frustrations over these developments along with an expensive incident while drinking involving the unauthorized taxiing of a P-38 Fighter plane at March Field California coupled with a growing drinking problem combined to keep him from realizing his goal of becoming a fighter pilot and caused him to be demoted.

As war became imminent in 1940, however, his exceptional skills as an engine line chief were deemed essential to the U. S. effort and his rank and responsibilities were restored. When our nation entered WWII, Sgt. McCrady repeatedly requested overseas duty in the combat zone but his requests were denied throughout the war. This only added to his pent up frustrations, complicating his serious drinking problem, as often happens in such cases.

Then came the war's end and along with it, the drastic cuts in the military budget which soon resulted in his being honorably discharged. But civilian "Mac" McCrady was almost totally unemployable. Airplane mechanics were not much in demand and for those who were also alcoholics, jobs were simply non-existent.

In the course of all this, the fine lady he had hoped to marry found his problems to be more than she could cope with, and she went away. Others who had done their best to help "Mac" straighten out his life were forced to admit failure and one by one they, too, faded out of his life. During the rare times he would gain temporary control of his drinking it was clear he still had his mechanical 'touch.'

One rainy day he was working as a day laborer for an agribusiness firm and rain meant no work and no work meant no pay. He had seen a big and obviously expensive piece of machinery rusting away in a shed he walked past each day. On that rainy day he asked if he could work on it. He was told that on several occasions factory representatives had tried and failed to repair it. He persisted, however, and grudgingly they decided to risk a day's wages of this 'minimum wage' laborer and he fixed it . More than a year later it was still doing what it was made for. Total cost - less than $20.

Mac knew alcohol was destroying his life and in 1947 he managed to dry out and 're-up' in the Air Force - the one love that never left him. His skills were quickly brought up to date and for the first time in more than a decade, he held his job by staying sober for nearly a year. He was soon promoted to the rank of flight sargeant. As flight sargeant he was assigned to the plane of Major General Bennet Myers, Procurement Chief for the Air Force. At the time, expensive gifts and top shelf entertaining was an (almost) acceptable practice on the part of vendors doing business with the armed forces.

Watches, attractive flasks of alcoholic spirits and sporting equipment were commonly lavished on the officers and enlisted men of the crew. Up until that fateful day in 1948, McCrady had always traded his liquor gifts for something else with one of his fellow crew members.

However, on that 4th of April Sunday morning in 1948, he had not yet opened his gift packet when they touched down at their home base in Akron Ohio. As the Captain left the plane, he instructed McCrady to refuel it in readiness for the next day's mission. As McCrady taxied into a long line of planes waiting to be fueled, he opened the gift package from the Texas vendor and discovered a handsome leather clad flask of Old Granddad Whiskey. He convinced himself that just one 'pull' from such a beautiful package couldn't do much harm and then he quickly tried it for fear he might change his mind.

Predictably, he took another 'pull' or two from the flask, saw there was enough fuel to fly 'almost anywhere,' and concluded that put Owatonna Minnesota well within his reach. At that point, he moved the plane out of the fuel lineup and onto the runway. With the runway clear both ways, it was but a matter of seconds until he was airborne, headed west toward Owatonna, Minnesota to see his family and friends.

Relying on a simple midwest road map and a common pocket compass, he took his bearings from water towers that identified towns along the way. What started out to be an exciting adventure commenced to lose some of it's luster as the effects of the Old Granddad wore off.

He anxiously wanted the trip to be over and he began to think of the consequences long before the plane was on the ground. Then, as he came onto the Owatonna scene, he became aware of a complication he had not, in his condition, given any thought to. The sky was 'littered' with small aircraft and the runway was never clear for more than three minutes at a time. This meant he had to wait for the small craft to come in for the day before he could even approach the runway.

Fortunately he had sufficient fuel to stay airborne and it was only after the last small craft had landed that Sgt. McCrady brought his craft into the landing pattern and headed for the much-too-short runway. Reverse engines, wheel brakes and heavy sod brought the plane to a halt a safe distance from any damage or harm. Climbing down from the bomber, Mac made his way to the airport office in the hopes of using the phone. He was greeted by the airport operator who was <u>also</u> known to 'drink a bit.' On this day it was <u>quite</u> a bit.

Attempts to communicate with the airport official proved unsuccessful so McCrady hoisted his barracks bag over his shoulder and hiked down the road to a restaurant and beer joint known as 'Bailey's Station.' He used the pay phone at Baileys to call the home of Norb and Natalie McCrady, his brother and sister in law. Natalie answered and because of the background noise at Baileys, she mistook Mac's voice for that of one Bob Bair who often called Norb when in need of help. She handed the phone to Norbert and said "it's Bob Bair."

Norbert had no reason to question her 'power of suggestion' so when the party on the other end said "I'm in trouble - can you come and pick me up at Bailey's Station?" he said "I'll be right out." Out he went, wondering along the way just what kind of trouble his friend Bob Bair had gotten into this time. Thinking Bair might be outnumbered, Norb took the precaution of slipping a 'nightstick' up his sleeve and then somewhat cautiously headed for the beer joint - looking into the bright lights. As he approached the place, a silhouette of a man with a barracks bag on his shoulder came toward him but it wasn't until he heard the 'silhouette' speak that he recognized the voice-print as that

of his brother Malcolm. Quick as a flash, the entire matter cleared up: the airplane, the phone call, the matter of 'being in trouble.'

So they quickly took off for the home of brother Norbert to discuss what had happened and why and to discuss how to best 'control' the damage now that it was too late to 'undo' the damage. Malcolm, Natalie and Norbert went over the situation several times and it was apparent that Malcolm felt his best bet was to flee to Canada.

Norbert and Natalie were against it.

After an hour or so, it was apparent that no progress was being made at which point Norbert suggested asking the Sheriff come out as a counselor. He knew the Sheriff wouldn't violate any agreement made in advance over the phone so upon convincing Malcolm it was okay, in a matter of minutes, Sheriff Don Christenson arrived and joined the discussion. He, too, felt it would be a mistake to flee to Canada and after a half hour or so, Mac reluctantly agreed to call the Air Force desk at Wold Chamberlin Field in Minneapolis to report his whereabouts. Thereupon, 'the Sheriff who never was there,' went home.

Contrary to the various stories concocted by the Air Force officials and by Glen Degner, manager of the Owatonna Airport to cover their inept handling of their respective responsibilities, Headquarters at Wright Patterson Field in Ohio had not yet discovered the plane was missing and Degner never did notify the authorities in town or anywhere else. He was a poor excuse for an airport manager.

The Air Force desk at Minneapolis thought Mac was 'pulling their leg' when he called to turn himself in. It was only after he gave his name, rank and serial number and the identification numbers on the plane that they agreed to call authorities at Wright Patterson Field. Then, and only then, did "all hell break loose." Within an hour, Military Police dispatched from Fort Snelling arrived at the McCrady home to place the 'errant airman' under arrest. Phone calls from media and air force officialdom were almost unceasing for the next several days.

Sgt. McCrady was arraigned and trial date was set. Things moved very quickly and because of his limited resources he had to settle for inexperienced, mediocre, unenthusiastic counsel that proved to be little more than 'waterboys' carrying out the whims of the air force heirarchy. The Air Force was livid over having their 'padded' crew policy stripped naked before their congressional critics and the entire nation.

The nation's media charged the Air Force with attempting to grossly misinform the Congress. It's been said "when brass is made to blush, heads will roll." The embarrassed brass demanded McCrady be punished like a deserter or a traitor. Two and a half years at hard labor was not enough. They wanted vengeance and that called for a penalty like that imposed on one who sells secrets to the enemy or who shows cowardice in the face of the enemy. Only a Dishonorable Discharge could pay for their embarrassment.

Forget the fact they had been lying to the Congressional Committee. Forget the fact they had been negligent in failing to ban the unholy relationships between vendors and the armed services. Forget the fact McCrady was an alcoholic and that they knew he was an alcoholic.

Sargeant Malcolm H. "Mac" McCrady did his time at Fort Leavenworth Penitentiary never blaming anyone but himself for being there. He sought to have the Dishonorable Discharge 'lifted' but the Air Force courts would have no part of it.

He was a patriot who respected the Flag and he loved the United States of America to his dying day.

Vengeance should never serve as a substitute for Justice.

But it did.